

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter April 7, 2024 jj

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Easter makes sense of everything else that we celebrate in the Church Year. We don't celebrate disjointed holidays and string them together like a fruit-cereal necklace, as if you happen to take one away and eat it, you still have the other loops on the string. No, instead, the Church Year is carefully constructed by a very knowledgeable and pious church heritage that has gone on for centuries. It tells a story that is vitally important to our faith in Jesus, our Christian life in this world, and our hope of the life of the world to come. Having just finished the seasons of Christmas, Epiphany and Lent – where we heard about how God sent His Son to be born of a Virgin so that He could suffer and die for the sin of the world – and now as we have begun the season of Easter – we rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. All that He did for us comes into clear focus for our faith. It was the same for the disciples: John said that he and the other disciples didn't understand the things Jesus said and did until after He was glorified, meaning His death and resurrection.

The Easter season does mark a significant shift in the story we hear every year. Jesus fulfilled His salvation mission on the cross and when He rose from the dead. As we move further into the season of Easter and on into Pentecost we'll take a closer look not only how God saves us, but also how He lifts us up in our faith, how He strengthens us, and how He enables us to go on living in this sinful world after receiving a foretaste of the glories that await us in heaven. Our God, you see, isn't only a God who worked in the past and has made promises for our future. He's also active in your life now, and in the lives of all His people as they go about their day to day activities.

Consider the Gospel for today. It begins on the first Easter Sunday evening. Only three days earlier Jesus had been crucified, died, and was

buried. The Disciples had only just recently heard the stories of His resurrection, which made them even more dazed and afraid. Having locked themselves away in a room for fear of what the Jews might do to them if they were caught together, the followers of Jesus made sure no one would be able to sneak in and catch them unawares. No doubt they were fearful of the Jews' reaction to the news of Jesus' resurrection, but they might also have been fearful about what Jesus might say to them for deserting Him during the hours before His death.

Then, all of a sudden, there He was – standing in their midst. Although He appeared miraculously, He didn't seem to be a ghost. He had a real human body and that body didn't look as if it had just spent three days in a tomb. He wasn't angry or distressed. They must have wondered to themselves what He was going to say or do – how He was going to react. Yet, the first words out of His mouth were the forgiving, freeing words: “Peace be with you!” Then He showed them the wounds on His hands and in His side. This was no ghost or a spirit – He was real – just like the peace He offered. His words weren't empty or meaningless, but they bestowed on them the peace which He had just purchased on Calvary's cross. And the most amazing thing was that this peace was now being given freely to them – the very ones who had betrayed and abandoned Him only three days earlier!

Jesus came among them to strengthen them and to reinforce their faith. He appeared in their midst to assure them that in His flesh He had indeed risen from the dead. He was there to plant the seeds of ministry in their hearts. He wanted them to go out and carry His peace and forgiveness to everyone. He was sending them on a mission – to go out into the farthest corners

of the world and declare this peace to all – to call all mankind to believe in this One who died on the cross for the salvation of sinners.

Next, our Savior breathed on them the Holy Spirit. There they were, downtrodden, dejected, not knowing what to do or how to do it – and then He spoke. He gave them power to move forward with boldness. Through the proclamation of His Word, people’s sins would be forgiven. All they had to do was proclaim this message. But Thomas wasn’t with the others that night. We don’t know why he wasn’t there, but we do know that because he wasn’t there he continued to doubt – and this even after the others told him the Good News of Christ’s resurrection. He made it clear that he refused to believe, that the fear and slowness of heart that afflicted the other disciples still had their clutches on his soul. His spiritual colleagues already had the personal contact with Jesus. They were ready for ministry in His holy Name, because at the very beginning, the Holy Spirit would spread the Church through these appointed eyewitnesses. Thomas knew that he would be disqualified as an apostle if he had missed his opportunity to see the Lord Jesus like the others did. How terrible would that feeling have been for him?

Thankfully, the other disciples managed to convince Thomas to be in the room with them the next Sunday to meet Jesus. They knew only the Lord could help him. They wanted Thomas to be united with them in proclaiming the glorious Easter message of forgiveness, life and salvation! You may think of it as a similar feeling that you get when you think of those you know and care about, those whom you hope and pray would someday join with you in the services of God’s house to meet with our risen Savior and receive His gifts. Maybe their faith is struggling right now. Perhaps they find it hard to believe. You know that only the Lord Jesus can help them.

For Thomas, He appeared in the room once again, despite the locked doors and the fearful hearts, and said as the Greek literally translated says: “May you cease to be unbelieving from this time forward. Instead, be constantly believing.” And Thomas, the doubter – when he saw and felt for himself the peace that God purchased for him in the wounds of His Savior – he was convinced. Devastated at the state of his faith, he cried out, “My Lord and my God!” God had stepped back into Thomas’ life and rekindled the flame of faith.

What an amazing God we have! Those who are down are lifted up. Those who are despondent are given that peace which passes understanding. Those who are crushed are made whole. Those who are blind are made to see. Those who are sinful are made righteous. When God comes into a person’s life, even though his heart is locked up in fear of the unknown, He changes that person from a sinner in danger of His wrath, into a beloved saint and an heir of everlasting life. He changes that person from the status of faithless enemy to the standing of a trusting child. What a tremendous God we have!

My dear Friends, at one time God also came into your life. Just as He came to the disciples, He also came to you. When you least expected it, there He was – in His Word, in His Bath of Baptism, and in His Supper – in His Church and in the mouth of His servant – showing you those wounds which earned you His peace. When you wanted least of all to believe, He enabled you to confess Him as God and Lord. When you scarcely wanted to serve Him, He placed you willingly into His service. And He’s still calling to you today – right now – calling you to hear His words of comfort and reconciliation– and to rejoice in the Gift of life He brings.

You do not have the same calling as the Apostle Thomas, yet you do have a holy calling, and the specific blessing from the mouth of Jesus: Blessed are you who have not seen and have

believed. You confess and declare with joy the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. You pray for the opportunity to bring those loved ones on your mind and heart to have contact here with the wounded, yet risen Lord Jesus, since Easter makes sense of what those wounds really did for you and for them and for the whole world. You can invite them to come, see and hear what you've seen and heard – even as the other Apostles invited Thomas. You may not be trained or qualified to be an evangelist – to be sure, the prospect of speaking to others about your faith might be rather frightening– but all God has ever asked is that you tell someone else what you already know to be true. After all, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this Book, but these things are written that” you “might believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name.”

It's a fearful task you face when you open your mouth to speak the Truth of God to someone who needs to hear it. Will they reject you for saying what you know you need to say? Will they laugh with scorn at your gullibility for believing something so amazing as this Gospel of Grace which saves us, or will they turn their back – thinking you're a fool? It doesn't matter, for this is really God's work, and when God gives us something to do, He also gives us the words and power to do it. So do it we will – sometimes fearfully, sometimes joyfully, sometimes even against our unwilling sinful nature – but always with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, causing us to do and say that which would otherwise be impossible. For although such things are impossible with us, with Jesus, our Lord and our God, nothing shall be impossible, and His Easter victory will make sense of anything you may not fully understand.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.